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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE LOVE OF ROMANTIC SCENERY IN AMERICA

FRIEDLÄNDER and others have made it a familiar thought that admiration and affection for wild and romantic scenery are modern feelings, belonging chiefly to the period since the middle of the last century. Among the ancients, isolated instances of such feelings may be found, but are certainly extremely rare. Their admiration was reserved for cultivated scenery, mild and gentle, meadows and orchards and lawns and springs. A characteristic passage is that in which Cicero notes as remarkable, that we take pleasure in places where we have long sojourned, *even though* they be mountainous and wooded. The medieval writers were, almost without exception, subject to the same limitations. Indifference to wild and mountainous scenery, abhorrence even, continued to be almost universal throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and indeed until after the middle of the eighteenth. Montaigne and Addison passed over the Alps without recorded sign of pleasure. Goldsmith, after visiting the Highlands of Scotland, wrote in disgust that "every part of the country presents the same dismal landscape," while soon afterward he wrote of Holland that "nothing can equal its beauty. Wherever I turned my eye, fine houses, elegant gardens, statues, grottos, vistas presented themselves. Scotland and this country bear the highest contrast; there, hills and rocks intercept every prospect; here it is all a continued plain." If a few passages in certain poems be left out of account, it may fairly be said that the modern feeling with respect to wild scenery was virtually non-existent at the time when these words were written (1754). It was in the next year that the youthful Gibbon made the tour of Switzerland, and the manner in which, writing his autobiography thirty years later, he speaks of these travels, is plain evidence that the great change came about, substantially, within a generation. In every place he visited the churches, arsenals, libraries, and all the most eminent persons; he examined Switzerland after the same manner in which he would have examined a country that had no scenery. "The fashion of climbing the mountains and reviewing the glaciers," he says, "had not yet been introduced by foreign travellers who seek the sublime beauties of nature." The *Nouvelle Héloïse* was published in 1759. A generation later, before Gibbon had

died, came that time in Wordsworth's youth which he has described in the lines written near Tintern Abbey, when

“The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite; a feeling and a love,
That had no need of a remoter charm,
By thought supplied, nor any interest
Unborrowed from the eye.”

And Wordsworth, and others like-minded with him, have taught to all subsequent generations a passionate love of wild and romantic scenery which sharply differentiates the modern feeling for nature from that of earlier times.

The history of this development has been traced in English and other European literatures. It is of some interest to examine its course in America. Shall we find such a change supervening, here also, within a limited time? Shall we find it proceeding spontaneously or by imitation? If the former, we may find in it some confirmation of that opinion which seems wisest in the European case, that this modern attitude toward nature arose not by the influence of Rousseau or any one writer, but that the change was one phase of that general “modulation of key” which we call the romantic movement. To the questions thus put, the travellers and the poets will furnish the best answers; and among travellers it is plain that those who are distinctively American will deserve the greatest weight.

Travellers to the colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were fond of recording their experiences in the new country, but most of them confined their descriptions to the social, economic, political and religious characteristics, with an occasional digression into the fields of geography or natural history. If they spoke of the land, it was generally with reference to its productive capacity, the wheat or tobacco which a given region yielded. There were chapters devoted to the climate, the soil, rivers and navigation, but not to scenery. Nor did many of them penetrate into the interior, where the wild scenery was to be found. But even those who braved the difficulties of inland discovery seem little impressed by anything save the horror and desolation of the region.

The first visit to the White Mountains, then called the Crystal or White Hills, seems without doubt to have been made in 1642, when Darby Field, an Irishman, in company with several others,

ascended them, hoping to find minerals of value. The account as given by Winthrop in his history of New England is as follows.

“In the same year, 1642, one Darby Field, an Irishman, with some others travelled to an high mountain, called the White Hills, an hundred miles or near upon to the west of Saco. It is the highest hill in these parts of America. They passed there many of the lower and rainy clouds as they ascended up to the top thereof, but some that were there afterwards saw clouds above them. There is a plain of sixty feet square on the top, a very steep precipice on the west side, and all the country round about them seemed like a level and much beneath them. There was a great expectation of some precious things to be found, either on the top or in the ascent, by the glistering of some white stones. Something was found like crystal, but nothing of value.”

There is not a word of the grandeur of the scenery, no reference to that which is romantic or picturesque, only a bare statement of facts as to situation, the dimensions of the plain and the steepness of the precipice.

Travellers to this region were not numerous during the seventeenth century. The Indians had a superstitious veneration for the summit, as the habitation of invisible beings, and not only never ventured to ascend it themselves, but also endeavored to dissuade everyone from the attempt. They were most earnest in their entreaties to Darby Field not to undertake the daring feat and thus stir up the wrath of the gods. The first visitor to leave an account of his journey in print was John Josselyn, the naturalist, who visited the mountains between 1663 and 1671, and from whom, in another age, we might expect a glowing account, or at least some allusion to the impression produced upon him by their grandeur. In his *New England Rarities Discovered* he says: “From this rocky hill you may see the whole country round about; it is far above the lower Clouds and from hence we beheld a vapor (like a great Pillar) drawn up by the Sun Beams out of a great Lake or Pond into the Air, where it was formed into a Cloud. The country beyond these Hills northward is daunting terrible, being full of rocky Hills, as thick as mole-hills in a meadow and clothed with infinite thick woods.” It is plain that the wildness impressed him, but not with feelings of admiration.

In his *Relation of Two Voyages to New England* Josselyn tells of a “neighbour” who “rashly wandered out after some stray’d cattle, lost his way, and coming as we conceived by his Relation near to the head spring of some of the branches of the Black Point River or Saco River did light into a Tract of land for God knows how many

miles full of delfes and dingles and dangerous precipices, rocks and inextricable difficulties which did justly daunt, yea, quite deter him from endeavoring to pass any further ; many such like places are to be met with in New England." Only once is the writer betrayed into an expression which borders upon appreciation of such scenes, and that is a mild reference to "one stately mountain . . . surmounting the rest."

Lahontan, writing of his voyage to America in 1688, speaks of a cataract as "fearful." In the same year John Clayton, a Yorkshire rector, sent to the Royal Society a *Letter giving Account of Several Observables in Virginia*, which contains chapters on the air, water, earth and soil, birds and beasts of Virginia, but not one word describing the natural scenery of the colony. Robert Beverley, who published his history of that colony in 1705, had certainly a vivid feeling for the beauties of nature as he saw them ; but as for the mountains, he regards them from a strictly utilitarian point of view. "A little farther backward there are mountains which indeed deserve the Name of Mountains for their Height and Bigness ; which by their difficulty in passing may easily be made a good Barrier of the country against Incursions of the Indians, etc., and shew themselves over the Tops of the Trees to many Plantations at 70 or 80 Miles distance very plain. These Hills are not without their Advantages ; for out of almost every rising Ground throughout the Country there issue abundance of most pleasant Streams of pure Chrystal Water, than which certainly the World does not afford any more delicious . . . where the finest water works in the World may be made, at a very small expence."

Daniel Neal, in his *History of New England*, published at London in 1719, in a description of New Hampshire, says : "The Inland part of the country is high and mountainous and consequently barren," a concise, but hardly an appreciative way of disposing of the White Mountains. That mountain scenery had not been reported to him with high laudations may be inferred from a casual remark in his description of Connecticut : "The East parts of this Country are pleasant and fruitful, but the Western are swampy and mountainous." Swamps and mountains were equally undesirable features of a landscape in the minds of our early forefathers. In 1729 Burton's *English Empire in America* appeared. It contains a description of Virginia, but no mention of the Natural Bridge, nor anything to denote an interest in the picturesque and romantic scenery of the colony. Except for the Rev. Andrew Burnaby (1759, 1760), there is perhaps no praise of the American mountains by foreign travellers until the time of the Revolution.

Meanwhile, in sporadic instances we find native expressions of appreciation of wild scenes. In the New York *Colonial Documents* one finds *The Journal and Relation of a New Discovery made behind the Apulcian Mountains to the West of Virginia*, written in 1671, in which we are assured that "In a clear place on the top of a hill [the discoverers] saw over against them to the southwest a curious prospect of hills, like waves raised by a gentle brize, rising one behind another. . . . They then returned homewards again, but when they were on the Top of the Hill they took a prospect as far as they could view and saw westerly over certain delightful hills." More conclusive in its bearing is the following phrase from the same account: "They had here a pleasing but dreadful sight to see Mts. and Hills piled one upon another." Here is an unmistakable instance of admiration for the grand, the awful—"pleasing but dreadful" is precisely the note of romanticism—and an illustration the more striking because it is the only one which the present writer has discovered in seventeenth-century descriptions of America.

Early in the eighteenth century another instance occurs, again a sporadic one, but explicit. Passages from Col. William Byrd's *History of the Dividing Line run in the Year 1728* clearly show that that vivacious writer shared the modern spirit. First, as to the admiration of mountains. "The smoke continued still to veil the mountains from our sight, which made us long for rain, or a brisk gale of wind, to disperse it. Nor was the loss of this wild prospect all our concern." "In the afternoon we marched up again to the top of the hill to entertain our eyes a second time with the view of the mountains, but a perverse fog arose that hid them from our sight." "In the evening a brisk northwester swept all the clouds from the sky, and exposed the mountains, as well as the stars, to our prospect. That which was the most lofty to the southward . . . we called the Lover's Leap." Perhaps even more striking exhibitions of the modern spirit will be thought to lie in the two extracts which follow: "The Irvin runs into the Dan about four miles to the southward of the line, and seemed to roll down its waters from the N.N.W. in a very full and limpid stream, and the murmur it made, in tumbling over the rocks, caused the situation to appear very romantic and had almost made some of the company poetical, though they drank nothing but water." "As we passed along, by favor of a serene sky, we had still, from every eminence, a perfect view of the mountains, as well to the north as to the south. We could not forbear now and then facing about to survey them, as if unwilling to part with a prospect which at the same time, like some rake's, was very wild and very agreeable." This last phrase, whimsically as it

is framed, is of precisely the sort we are seeking, strangely as it sounds from a contemporary and friend of Pope.

Let us return to Burnaby. Travelling through the middle settlements of America in 1759 and 1760, he writes of the Blue Ridge, "When I was got to the top, I was inexpressibly delighted with the scene which opened before me." He speaks of the Shenandoah as "exceedingly romantic and beautiful." To quote further: "I could not but reflect with pleasure on the situation of these people, and think if there is such a thing as happiness in this life, that they enjoy it . . . they are everywhere surrounded with beautiful prospects, sylvan scenes, lofty mountains, transparent streams, falls of water, rich vallies and majestic woods." Pownall's *Topography of the Middle Colonies of North America* is equally unmistakable in its language. "The general Face of the country when one travels it along the Rivers through parts not yet settled, exhibits the most picturesque Landscapes that Imagination can conceive, in a variety of the noblest, richest Groupes of Wood, Water and Mountains."

From the Revolution on, there is little doubt of the general existence of the new sentiment in the cultivated American mind. If it were not impossible to fix upon a definite date for the beginning of movements in the history of mind, one would be tempted to select the years from 1780 to 1785 as the time when this new spirit of admiration for wild and romantic scenery became fully established. Before this, its manifestations had been exceptional; henceforth they are abundant in the writings of both natives and foreigners. Many of the foreign travellers of this period were Frenchmen, and it is perhaps to be expected that they would be among the first to exhibit this tendency. Chastellux's expression (1780-1782) is characteristic: "all this apparatus of rude and shapeless Nature, which Art attempts in vain, attacks at once the senses and the thoughts and excites a gloomy and melancholy admiration." Smyth's *Tour in America* (1784) shows the new tendency even on its title page, "An account of the present situation of the Country . . . Mountains, Forests, Rivers, and the most beautiful, grand and picturesque Views throughout that vast Continent." If no date were given for the publication of the book this title-page would almost prove that its date was not earlier than the latter half of the eighteenth century. The heading of one of the chapters is: "Description of a most extensive, grand and elegant perspective. Ideas raised in the mind." Before this time most travellers in America had not been burdened by ideas raised in the mind by the scenery.

More interesting to the present purpose, no doubt, are the ex-

pressions of American observers in these years. Take, for instance, Jefferson's remarks on the Natural Bridge, in his *Notes on Virginia* (1781-1784). He declares it "the most sublime of Nature's works." "It is impossible," he says, "for the emotions arising from the sublime to be felt beyond what they are here : so beautiful an arch, so elevated, so light, and springing as it were up to Heaven. The rapture of the spectator is really indescribable." The Reverend Archibald Alexander, who as a youth visited it about 1789, speaks of it as exciting in him "an emotion entirely new," "a genuine emotion of the sublime;" and adds, "I never saw one of any class, who did not view the object with considerable emotion." Evidently the taste for such scenery was becoming endemic.

If we turn again to the White Mountains, so little thought of in colonial times, we find the *Belknap Papers* of 1784 a mine of suggestion. In his diary of this year (July 28) Dr. Belknap says of a meadow in the Notch, "This meadow, surrounded on all sides with mountains, some of them perpendicular, is a singularly romantic and picturesque scene." Again, in describing the Notch, he calls it "a most sublimely picturesque and romantic scene." We have already noticed in Smyth's *Tour* a reference to "ideas raised in the mind" by the scenery. This suggestion of a psychological effect we find still more pronounced in Dr. Belknap's descriptions. "These beauties of nature gave me inexpressible delight. The most romantic imagination here finds itself surprised and stagnated. Everything which it had formed an idea of, as sublime and beautiful, is here realized. Stupendous mountains, hanging rocks, chrysal streams, verdant woods, the cascade above, the torrent below, all conspire to amaze, to delight, to soothe, to enrapture; in short to fill the mind with such ideas as every lover of Nature and every devout worshipper of its Author would wish to have." He thinks that "a poetic fancy may find full gratification amidst these wild and rugged scenes, if its ardor be not checked by the fatigue of the approach;" but would caution the observer to "curb the imagination and exercise judgment with mathematical precision, or the temptation to romance will be invincible."

John Eliot, writing to Dr. Belknap, says: "Brother Cutler is romantic in his description, as well as you, in the short touch you gave me in your letter." It was during this year, 1784, that the Reverend Manasseh Cutler, in company with several others, made the first scientific expedition to the White Mountain region, and one is not surprised to find in his journals such memoranda as: "we had here a grand view of ranges of mountains . . . arising one

above another ;" "the country to the north very mountainous, and its appearance has a most noble effect."

In the closing decade of the century there is no dearth of expressions of admiration for the picturesque and romantic ; indeed they are so common as to give the impression of their being somewhat of a "fad" at the time. Dr. Thomas Cooper, in his *Some Information respecting America* (1794), in describing the mountain scenery of Pennsylvania, says : "It is impossible to pass this part of the journey without being struck with the perpetual succession of beautiful and romantic situations, numerous and diversified beyond what any part of England can supply within my recollection." A lesser person, a certain James Elliot, who is described on the title page of his *Poetical and Miscellaneous Works* as "a citizen of Guildford, Vermont, and late a non-commissioned officer in the legion of the United States," has left sketches of the Whisky Insurrection in Pennsylvania in 1794, in which he finds time to describe the scenery as well as the movements of the militia ordered out to oppose the rioters in the western counties. One entry in his diary tells us that at Harrisburg "the traveller has a very picturesque prospect of a lofty ridge of the Blue Mountains." Another entry three weeks later describes the passage of the mountains. "The Sun had risen about an hour before we moved this morning. Began to ascend the mountain and after a fatiguing march of two or three hours reached the summit, where a prospect inexpressibly grand presented itself to our view. To the north, south and west appeared a little world of mountains, arrayed in all the majesty of nature and destitute of a single sign of art or cultivation." This last could hardly be improved upon as an example of the romantic or modern way of looking at natural scenery. In a sketch of a summer passage up the Ohio, he speaks of the scene as "indescribably beautiful and romantically picturesque," and describes the western part of America as abounding "in picturesque situations and beautiful landscapes."

Graham's *Letters* (1797) speaks enthusiastically of the "romantic scenery" of Vermont. "More picturesque . . . situations for building upon can scarcely be conceived, than those formed by the curvatures of the water along this delightful shore . . . and here let me observe that the most romantic imagination can scarcely conceive anything more commanding than the scenes many of these settlements present to the view." Yet only fourteen years earlier Charles Varlo, in his book called *Nature Displayed*, had said of this same region : "The country of Vermont is a very barren mountainous rough country and thinly inhabited. . . . Indeed it is a very disagreeable country either to travel through or live in."

The *Travels* of President Dwight (1797, 1803) show the love of romantic scenery fully developed. It is hard to choose from such a wealth of material, when almost every page of the description of the White Mountains abounds in expressions of admiration for their rugged grandeur. "Mountains in immense ranges, bold spurs and solitary eminences . . . are everywhere dispersed with delightful successions of sublimity and grandeur." Former travellers had carefully avoided the region because of the mountains; Dr. Dwight says, "The scenery in the Notch of the White Mountains . . . was one of the principal objects which had allured us into the region." He is impressed by the "wild and solemn appearance." He personifies the "hoary cliffs" which, "rising with proud supremacy, frowned awfully on the world below." He speaks of the "sprightly murmurs" of the cascade, of the "wild, tumultuous and masterly workmanship of nature," and of her "wild and awful majesty." It would be impossible to find more conclusive evidence of admiration for the romantic in nature than expressions such as "The eye finds here everything which can gratify its wishes for rude, wild and magnificent scenery;" "The scene excelled every conception which they had hitherto formed of awfulness and grandeur;" "bidding adieu, therefore, to the singular combination of wild and awful magnificence, we set out on our return."

We have traced the development of the love of romantic scenery among travellers; a glance at the poets of the eighteenth century will show that its development was certainly not earlier among them. There was no lack of what was called poetry before the Revolution, but it reveals little or no love of romantic scenery. There were poems to Phyllis, Daphne and Amanda, verses political and patriotic, metaphysical and religious, elegies and satires; but poems in praise of nature were few, unless of a much-adorned and cultivated nature in the form of "groves and fertile lawns," of "purling rills" and "prattling streams." It is distinctly the "pleasing landscape" and

"the lawn

Beaut'ous at morn, at noonday and the dawn;
Rural shades and groves e'er attract the mind,
And lead the thoughts to those things that's divine."

A poem read at the Yale commencement of 1784 speaks of Niagara, but as the

"stupendous Niagarian falls
Which to behold the affrighted heart appalls,"

with no sign of pleasure. Early visitors to the falls speak of them in much the same way. Father Hennepin (1697) describes them

as a "vast and prodigious cadence of water, which falls down after a surprising and astonishing manner, in so much that the universe does not afford its parallel." The feeling aroused is one of wonder rather than of admiration and pleasure.

As late as 1797, Josias Arnold, tutor in Rhode Island College, published a collection of poems from which a stanza may be quoted to show the old feeling as to romantic nature still surviving.

"Where ancient forests their tall branches bend,
And o'er the wild a horrid gloom extend,
There shall appear a variegated scene,
Of fields and gardens in perennial green."

On the other hand, before the close of the Revolution the new feeling for nature in her more majestic moods begins to find poetical expression, as, for instance, in a poem read at the Yale Commencement in 1781,

"What various grandeur strikes the gladdening eyes;
Bays stretch their arms and mountains lift the skies,
And all the majesty of nature smiles."

More distinctly of the sort we are seeking, an inscription to *The Prospect of America* (1786) speaks of

"Those deep forests, where the eye is lost,
With beauteous grandeur mingling in the sight;
All these conspire to give the soul delight."

Barlow's *Vision of Columbus* (1787) shows a still more marked love of romantic scenery. The poet sings of the "majesty of nature," of her "nobler prospects" and "sublimest scenes," of the hills "that look sublime o'er Hudson's winding bed."

"A dread sublimity informs the whole,
And wakes a dread sublimity of soul."

The writer of a *Rhapsody*, published in 1789, exclaims:

"How oft, delighted with the wild attire
Of nature, in her recesses, thro' scenes
Like these, in roving childhood have I strayed,
Aw'd with the gloom and desert solitude
That environed me
There is a rude disorder in these wilds,
A native grandeur, that, unaffected
By the touch of art, transcends its graces,
And strikes some finer sense within the soul."

Quite Wordsworthian is this point of view, and far removed from that of the admirer of "purling rills" and "verdant lawns." One more illustration may be taken from poems published in 1792 by a Mr. Edwards:

. . . "where sublime
 Yon wond'rous mountains rise, whose shaggy sides
 Invests th' ethereal azure and whose brows
 Th' eternal vapour shrouds. Great Nature there
 Reigns in dread majesty and unshorn strength.

 Musing, I wander, and admiring trace
 Old ocean's abdicated Empire there."

The writer of an essay on poetry, published in 1795, says, "Almost every person is delighted with the prospect of Nature. The sublimity of the heavens, the towering mountain, the unfathomable and wide extended ocean, the blooming gardens and level vallies inspire the mind with elevation and contemplative reflection." The author of the *Poetical Wanderer*, which appeared the next year, 1796, writes, "Everyone is sensible of the impression made by viewing the sublime objects of nature. . . . The blazing sun, the spacious firmament, the spangled heavens, the towering mountains, variegated landscapes, the expanded ocean, are all grand and beautiful and we contemplate them with delight." The quotations are significant, for by the words of contemporary writers they show that the love of the romantic and grand in nature was no longer an undeveloped element of American character.

Recurring to the questions suggested at the beginning of this article, we may certainly conclude that the change of mind, in America also, came about within a definitely limited time, and namely, so far as most instances show, at about the time of the Revolution. That it was spontaneous or indigenous will not be thought to have been so clearly proved, yet it is not without evidence.

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